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Iraq : Release of political prisoners welcomed but much remains to be done

In a letter sent today to the Iraqi government Amnesty International welcomed the reported release of political prisoners in Iraq but asked for urgent clarification regarding the names of the political detainees who have reportedly benefited from the general amnesty.

On 20 October the Revolutionary Command Council, the highest executive body in Iraq, issued a decree signed by President Saddam Hussain ordering a general amnesty for all political prisoners within 48 hours. Arab nationals detained in Iraqi prisons were among those to be released, including 80 Jordanians. Iraqi television later showed the release of dozens of prisoners from Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad. The amnesty reportedly includes those sentenced to death, including those sentenced in absentia and who are abroad, and excludes those charged with espionage for foreign countries.

Amnesty International has over the years documented gross human rights violations committed on a massive scale in Iraq affecting all sectors of society. These violations, which have been committed by Iraqi military, intelligence and security personnel, have included "disappearances" of thousands of people, the extensive use of the death penalty, extra-judicial executions, arbitrary arrests, long-term detention without charge or trial, grossly unfair and secret trials, systematic torture of suspected political opponents, judicial punishments constituting torture or cruel, inhuman punishments, prisoners of conscience, and forcible expulsions.

Most of the victims of human rights violations have been suspected political opponents, including army and security officers or retired army officers suspected of plotting against the government, relatives of opposition activists outside the country and members of religious and ethnic minority groups, particularly from the Kurdish community and Shi'a Muslims.

In the letter sent today to the Iraqi government the organization also sought urgent clarification about the fate of thousands who "disappeared" in the 1980s and after the 1991 Gulf war, including more than 600 Kuwaiti and other nationals, as well as 106 Shi'a clerics and students who were arrested in the southern city of al-Najaf. The organization asked the Iraqi government, as a matter of urgency, to repeal all laws and practises that have led to the mass human rights violations in the country.

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